

Rebuilding Shakespeare's Globe

Christopher Innes

Two main lines in Shakespeare production have emerged during the century, which are antithetical in their approach and even vision of Shakespeare. These can be categorized (*à la* Polonius) as the Archeological-Restorative-Prototypical, and the Contemporaneous-Topical-Relevant. Each is essentially scholarly in inspiration, and both feed into commercial theatre. The first, beginning with William Poel and the English Stage Society, has given birth -- via Tyrone Guthrie -- to current reconstructions of the Globe Theatre. The other, validated by Jan Kott's "Shakespeare Our Contemporary", leads through modern-dress performances to the post-modernist "Wars of the Roses" by the English Stage Company under Ian Bogdanov, or to gender-reversed Lears by Robert Wilson (Stuttgart) and Richard Rose (Toronto). However incompatible, both share a claim to authenticity; and the similarity in name between Poel's group and Bogdanov's is not altogether coincidental. Historical exploration aims to uncover basic facts about the texts -- post-modernist interpretations are designed to reveal thematic truths in terms of today's consciousness. At the same time, the effect of each is to elevate staging at the expense of the plays.

It is only to be expected that this urge for authenticity should have coincided initially with the naturalistic movement. Stanislavski's planned staging of *Julius Caesar*, centering on an exact reproduction of the Capitol and streets of Rome as they would have appeared in 55BC, and based on extensive documentary research, is typical of its time. It sought to transform Shakespeare's play into the values of the age, combining objective materialism and environmental Darwinism. In fact, Stanislavski's approach can be seen as an extension of 19th century spectacular treatments of Shakespeare. (One might also mention Beerbohm Tree's recreation of the wood, complete with rabbits, for *Midsummer Night's Dream*.) To our eyes such scenic exactitude appears incongruous; but I would argue that it is emblematic of both lines in contemporary Shakespeare production. Stanislavski's aims can be seen as directly comparable with the Archeological-Restorative-Prototypical school in terms of historical accuracy -- and in essence no different from the Contemporaneous-Topical-Relevant, each being intended to speak directly to the audiences of their particular era.

Where Stanislavski's point would have been made through scenery, Bogdanov's was expressed primarily through the costumes -- mixing periods and styles. And the results would have been similar: a displacement of focus, distorting the essential nature of the work in the name of current intellectual fashion. Gender-bending casting offers an even clearer example, since the politically-correct equality that motivates it assumes audience "blindness" to the most central aspect of their lives, as well as nullifying the sexual conflicts forming the core of most Shakespearean tragedies. Of course in the Elizabethan period all female parts are known to have been performed by boy actors -- and both Shakespeare's and Jonson's plays underline this by making thematic use of cross-dressing: as in *As You Like It*, where the boy actor playing Rosalind is required to switch from a dress to breeches and portray a girl pretending to be a boy, and then show that disguised "girl" playing the role of herself ("Rosalind") to test the man who loves her without him recognizing anything but the "boy" he/she is claiming to be. Similarly but making the opposite point, Cleopatra -- performed originally by a boy-actor -- imagines herself being travestied in Rome because imitated by a "squeaking boy". But where this cross-dressing appears to have been accepted by Shakespeare's original audience, to the point where it is such a naturalized convention that it can be played against, that is by no means the case today.

The practice underlines the high artifice of Elizabethan drama, which is in strong contrast to the Naturalistic conventions which have so completely dominated mainstream theatre for the last century and more that it determines the reception of all dramatic characters, even those of Brecht, who insisted on acting styles that would prevent any naturalistic identification. So when an all-male *Macbeth* was mounted in London, if the reviews were representative that completely absorbed the audience attention to the exclusion of every other aspect of the production, with some critics even identifying it as a specifically gay production. More recently a production of *Twelfth Night* at the reconstituted London Globe presented a well-known female impersonator as Olivia. The acting was critically praised, but automatically appeared on quite a different level of artifice to the actors in male parts in a way that was intrusive. And the problem is still more acute when the cross-gender casting goes the other way – as with Marianne Hopper's performance of King Lear in Robert Wilson's Berlin production.

Although there are indeed actresses technically capable of playing male protagonists, doing so not only blurs an average spectator's emotional response, but also radically diminishes the range of meanings that can be read into the performance instead of enhancing interpretive possibilities, and it also produces an almost insuperable challenge to credibility. The often-cited analogy to "colour-blind" casting is misleading: while audiences might be able to accept this in much "classic" drama, this seems to be largely because the modern public's grasp of historical context is unclear, aided in Shakespeare's case by the a-historical quality in much of his work. However, there would be obvious difficulties where race is a central issue, as in *Othello*, or even with a play like *The Tempest* in which colonialism is an underlying theme; and "gender-blind" casting is problematic in precisely the same way. It also tends to attract all attention solely to itself, as demonstrated by the notorious London all-male production of *Macbeth*. And insofar as that single-sex *Macbeth* was reproducing the acting conventions of Elizabethan theatre, it also represents some of the problems with the other line in modern Shakespeare production.

Although the belief of the English Stage Society may have been that they were restoring Shakespeare's plays to their original stagings, in practice their productions were only the roughest approximation of the Elizabethan theatre. The value of Poel's approach lay in showing the viability of Shakespeare's plays as written by stripping away the scenic (and literary) excesses of Victorian actor-managers. By returning to a bare stage and neutral curtains he was restoring the centrality of the text, as well as rescuing Shakespeare from the accretions of the centuries. In this Poel was highly influential. But his performances should perhaps be seen in conjunction with his contemporary, William Godwin, who attempted to reproduce the performance conditions of ancient Greek theatre for late-19th century verse plays written in imitation of classical tragedy. To our eyes (though much praised at the time) Godwin's undertaking looks highly artificial, academic in the worst sense; and while the differences to Poel's work are clear, there are some revealing parallels to the current vogue for reconstructing exact replicas of the Globe.

The Sam Wannamaker-inspired edifice on London's south bank is well known; but another identical phoenix is also arising in the fields of North Carolina. These architectural reproductions have been justified in various ways, primarily as venues -- indeed models -- for Shakespearean productions. But in contrast both to the various theatres that Guthrie established, where modified thrust stages compromise creatively with the standard

scenography of commercial performance, and even to the cockpit stage at Stratford on Avon, the Wannamaker Globe is a conscious anachronism.

It is not only as close as possible to the geographical position of the original -- although none of the social reasons for the siting of the Elizabethan theatres still apply. The construction is also designed to be an almost exact copy, down to the last wooden peg -- foregoing all the architectural advances that have transformed theatres into sophisticated machines. Such building methods will make this one of the most expensive theatres in London; and the relatively small scale of the prototype means that no performance could be self-financing. Put in these terms, the absurdity of such an undertaking can only be explained by fund-raising requirements -- and as an anachronism the building itself will inevitably absorb all the audience's attention. The context will overwhelm any content, making whatever is performed seem equally imitative and artificial.

There may be viable academic justifications for reproducing the Globe -- as a research-tool for discovering the potential of a stage form that produced the most vibrant drama of any period in English-speaking theatre prior to the 20th century -- or conversely, for exploring Shakespeare's plays through the context for which they were written. It has even been seen as a facility for actor-training (though it is hard to imagine how the experience would suit the performance-conditions of any other contemporary theatre). But neither the site, nor the construction-methods are necessary for such tasks; and the expense will effectively preclude them. Instead it will be occupied year-round with tourists, viewed in the same way as Madame Tussauds wax-works. And that this will be the eventual fate of the London Globe becomes all too clear from glancing at its North Carolinian epigone. The explicit purpose for this is exclusively tourism (with a commercially-minded nod to "students seeking educational experience"); and from the publicity plans, the theatre itself is to be surrounded with quaintly "olde Englishe" cottages, housing restaurants, restrooms and souvenir shops. Naturally, in this theme park, the highlight (and "cultural" draw) of tours is to be performances of Shakespeare's plays.

As public activities, in themselves tourism and commercialization may be useful and enjoyable. However, placing Shakespeare in Disney World is problematic. At best cultural monumentalism reduces the plays to museum pieces. Shakespeare's work may be well able to survive one Globe on each continent (or even, if the first proves commercially successful, a dozen), but the enthusiastic cooption of the scholarly community is likely to do far more damage. Almost the only protests so far have been (naive) complaints about the inevitable take over of the London Globe by tourist interests: in other words, affirming the supposedly artistic functions of the cultural monument.

Relegating Shakespeare to the museum is as bad as aggressive updating. The Archeological-Restorative-Prototypical and Contemporaneous-Topical-Relevant schools are both potentially destructive. It is universally accepted that 18th century "improvements" on Shakespeare, Nahum Tate et al, were monstrous aberrations, eviscerating and travestyng the plays. Today we are enthusiastically promoting the same sort of distortion and excess, without even the 18th century excuse that this is popularizing Shakespeare's work. A fundamental rethinking of scholarly approaches to Shakespeare, and indeed all pre-twentieth century drama, is urgently required.